**Freefall**

**Chapter One**

Kenny Sellars lay in bed with his clothes on, waiting for them to come. Through a slight opening in his window, he listened to the innocuous sounds of the suburban neighborhood—crickets chirping, an unhappy dog a couple of blocks away, the occasional car traversing the quiet street, the hiss of leaves rustling in the gentle June breeze. He had shut the air conditioning off, eliminating the background hum. He had turned on every exterior light. He waited here, waited for them to come, waited for the same depressing reason he seemed to do everything: he didn’t know what else to do.

They would come at night—that was just common sense. They would come from the rear, through the neighbor’s yard, but he had to assume they would watch the front, too, probably using a clump of bushes near the street as cover. Once they got here, he was less sure how they would get in. He guessed they would either pry open the sliding glass door on the rear deck, or force a basement window. They undoubtedly knew he was home alone.

Why on earth was he still here? As long as he stayed, he could hope they wouldn’t come—might never come. He could tell himself running would be silly. He was a bit player, hardly worth the effort.

They would come. Some things you just know.

Kenny supposed that someone who had done what he had done, associated with the people he had associated with, should be hardened, street-smart—wise beyond his years. But he felt as oblivious, as confused, as manipulated as the clueless teenager he had been all along. And yet, late at night, when the swirling thoughts and emotions slowed, sorting themselves out, settling like a stone in the pit of his abdomen, the appalling clarity set in: He had sold his soul. Sold it cheaply. Sold it without thinking, for the most shallow, banal, teenage reasons.

He heard something. Or maybe sensed it. He couldn’t say, now or later, exactly what caused the change in his environment’s equilibrium. He had willed himself not to get up constantly to check the back yard. But now, he got up.

He stood well back from the window, scanning the back yard. The movement he sensed came in the form of shadows, of dark, indistinct shapes. He thought there were two.

It was really happening. Incredible, but inevitable. He didn’t have time to think about it. He’d been warned that there were at least two, the tall woman—the blonde—and another guy. But there might be more. And what did they want? His friend Liam didn’t know.

But Kenny did.

*There.* One shape scooted along the edge of the yard to the corner of the house. Showtime, Kenny thought. He went next door to the master bedroom, picked up the landline on the nightstand, and dialed 911. When the operator picked up, he spoke the words, “Home intrusion,” and set the phone on the table.

Next, he pulled out his cell phone, sent a brief text, and replaced the phone in his pocket. From the off-the-hook phone on the nightstand, he could hear the operator’s voice. “Sir? Sir? Are you there? Did you say ‘home intrusion’?”

He ran back to his bedroom. From downstairs, he heard a muted crack as someone forced open the sliding glass door. He didn’t bother looking out toward the front of the house; the intruders would have that covered. Hesitating briefly, he listened, hearing footsteps downstairs. And then, on the staircase.

Kenny grabbed his pre-loaded backpack and ran toward the bathroom at the end of the hallway. Guided by a faint night light, he stepped into the bathtub and pushed open the small window on the wall above it. From down the hallway, he heard shuffling and saw the jerky streaks of flashlights on the walls.

He squeezed through the window and dropped down onto the roof of a metal storage shed a few feet away from the house, as he had practiced earlier in the day. From there, he jumped down to the ground, stumbled, and crawled through the shrubbery shielding his house from the next-door neighbor’s. As he emerged in the neighbor’s yard, he heard a clatter and a thump behind him. One of the intruders had come out the window after him.

He hadn’t expected that.

He ran through the dark, as fast as safety would allow, through the back yard, parallel to the street, to the opposite end of the neighbor’s house, to the far side of the yard, vaulting over a chain link fence. He could hear footsteps behind him.

He made it through another back yard, then swerved to his right, to the street, reasoning that the intruders’ vehicle probably would have been parked on the street behind his block, rather than out front. He began to turn left, down the street, but headlights, apparently belonging to a large SUV, appeared at the end of the block. He continued across the street, briefly illuminated by the headlights, past a house, and into another back yard. Meanwhile, he heard footsteps behind him, on the street.

Kenny now found himself in uncharted territory. He had planned his route earlier in the day, scouting out obstacles and estimating distances, confident that he'd be able to lose any pursuers. But the unknown followers were forcing him to change plan. He couldn’t follow the street, and now, traversing unfamiliar dark back yards, he was running as blindly as those who followed. Behind him, a dog barked. He sensed a shape ahead, too late. He ran into a chain link fence, hitting it waist-high. Letting his momentum carry him, he flipped headfirst over the fence, landing hard on his back on the other side.

Instantly, his pursuer appeared at the fence, vaulting over behind him. When the figure lunged at him, he scuttled off to the side, along the fence, scraping his hand on a large, protruding tree root. He jumped to his feet and took off. Behind him, he heard a muffled thud and a muttered curse. His pursuer had stumbled, probably on the tree root. Kenny ran between two houses, toward a lighted street. He emerged at the street and was instantly illuminated by headlights from a large SUV, undoubtedly the same one he’d seen earlier.

He didn’t break stride. He shot across the street into another yard, and after negotiating the back yard found himself in a wooded area. He took a sharp right and thrashed blindly through the woods. Bushes scraped his hands and face, and then he fell hard over a rock. He got up and resumed his flight. He could hear scraping sounds behind him, but couldn’t tell if the woman was on his trail.

The woman. The blonde woman. He’d caught a glimpse of her when she had lunged at him at the base of the fence. She was as Liam had described her—tall, athletic. And Liam . . . Who knew what happened to him?

And then he was falling. Rolling, tumbling, further and further down a large hill, over branches, bushes, and weeds, finally coming to rest in a bed of rotted leaves. Instinctively, he crawled under the leaves, next to a log, and remained motionless, breathing in the pungent odor of leaves, rotting wood, and dirt. From above came the sounds of thrashing and the jerky zigzags of flashlight beams. After a few minutes there were voices, accompanied by more thrashing and more flashlights. He burrowed deeper into the leaves, deeper into the black hole of primal fear, feeling the ancient, imprinted certainty of the hunted.

If these people found him, he would die.